



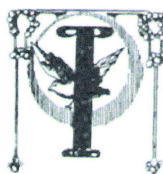
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A Cruise After Sea Elephants

By Charles Miller Harris



IN the early spring of 1907, while on a hunting trip for the Big Horn sheep, in the San Pedro Martir Mountains of Lower California, Mexico, rumors reached me which indicated the possible existence of a small herd of the generally considered extinct California Elephant Seal (*Macrorhinus*). They are largest of all seals, the old bulls attaining a size greater than that of the walrus.

My guide, from whom I got the first intimation that some of these rare mammals might still be found, informed me that a Mexican had told him that he had seen some of these animals on the shores of the "*Isla de Guadalupe*," an island lying some 180 miles off the west coast of Lower California, in about latitude twenty-nine

north, longitude one eighteen west.

This interested me very much, as I knew it would be considered by naturalists a great catch if I could secure some specimens. So I made it a point to find this Mexican, and, from what he told me, I came to the conclusion that my information was good. Upon my return to the land of Uncle Sam, I communicated with the Honorable Walter Rothschild, of England, who had been my patron before, and whose magnificent collections of natural history specimens at the museum on the Rothschild's Estate at

Tring, Herts, England, are among the finest in the world. I was immediately cabled to make the try, and you can be sure I at once "set the mills to grinding," for I had been at Guadalupe, in company with the late W. E. Bryant of the California Acad-



SIDE VIEW OF BULL.



TODOS SANTOS BAY AND TOWN OF ENSENADA, THE CAPITAL OF LOWER (BAJA) CALIFORNIA.

eny of Sciences, in 1885, making a collections of birds, and our hopes had then run in the direction of elephant seals, as it was thought that the island might possibly be the home of a remnant of the practically exterminated beast; but we saw no evidence of their existence.

I was very anxious to accomplish what we had failed in twenty-two years before, the lapse of time lending added value to success.

I will not dwell on several tiresome weeks spent at San Diego in an attempt to secure a vessel flying Old Glory. The maritime laws of Mexico are very peculiar. Foreign vessels of under thirty tons are rated as pirates and not allowed ordinary American privileges, without a special permit from Mexico City. This I did not want to wait for, and as I could find no sailing master willing to take a chance at being overhauled as a pirate by a Mexican war vessel, I was obliged to accept

the opportunity offered to charter a small vessel at San Quentin, a small port some 200 miles south of San Diego.

Just about this time the Mexican, Ignacio, who had informed me of the seals, came into San Diego as one of the crew of a Mexican vessel hailing from Guaymas. I at once enlisted him in my service, and on the evening of May 8, accompanied by Ignacio and V. L. Carroll, of Buffalo, who was to go with me to the island, I boarded the *St. Denis*, a steamer plying down the coast; and the

next morning we arrived at Ensenada, Bay of Todos Santos, port of entry for the northern division of Lower California. It is several miles up the north shore of this beautiful bay where Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson has a pretty bungalow to which at times with chosen friends she retires to escape the rush and swirl of our more northern civilization. Leaving Ensenada toward evening we were landed

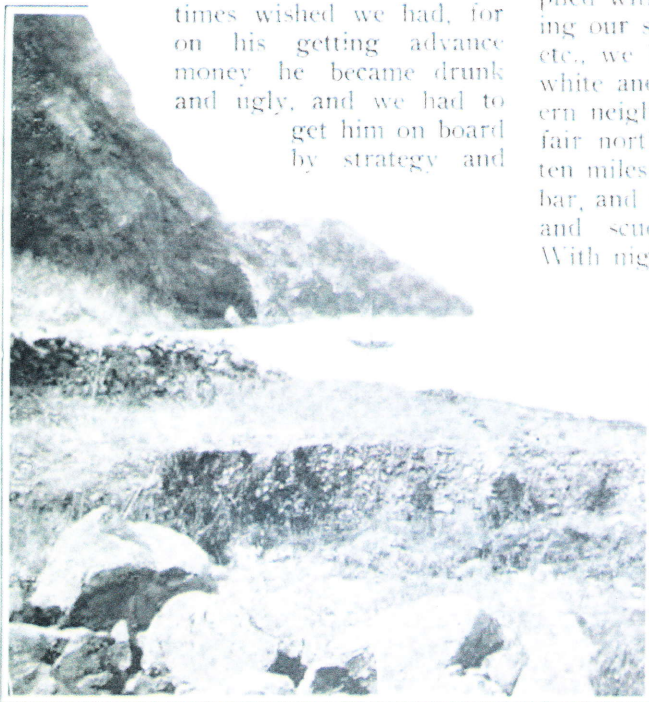


THE "FREIA," OUR RIGHT AND TIGHT LITTLE SHIP.

at San Quentin late the next morning.

We began preparations for our voyage at once. An inspection of the *Freia*, the little craft which was to carry us to Guadalupe, showed her to be schooner-rigged, sharp at both ends, steering with a tiller, and incidentally having a bit of romance attached to her; she having been a guano "poacher," her cabin showed bullet holes made by shots from the guns of the revenue boats when she was a "renegade." We employed for crew, beside Ignacio (or as I called him, my man Friday, he having been marooned alone for six months on a small island not long before), three Mexicans, one a sailor, one as cook and sailor, and the captain, Lopez by name; a man whose violent attachment for that nationally-beloved, villainous poison called *mescal*, gave us much trouble, but as he was the only man at San Quentin having "papers" to sail a vessel, we were obliged to put up with him.

Mr. Cannon, from whom we chartered the vessel, said: "Never mind, Ignacio can sail the boat; throw Lopez overboard after you clear and get outside." We did not do this, but many times wished we had, for on his getting advance money he became drunk and ugly, and we had to get him on board by strategy and



LEE PORT, BARRACKS BAY.

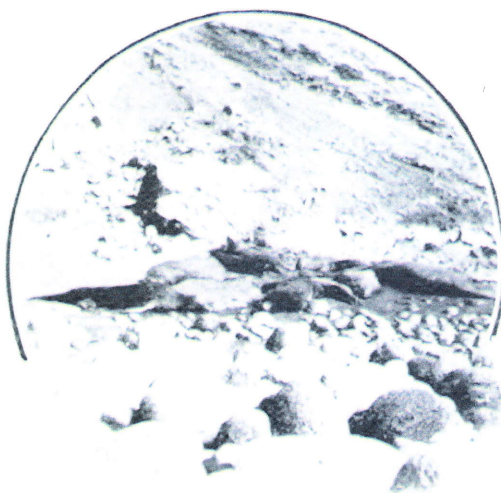


CYPRESS GROVE, SUMMIT OF THE ISLAND.
MESSRS. CARROLL AND IGNACIO IN
THE FOREGROUND.

keep him there by force and argument.

It was early morning, May 24, when, with the *Freia* well provisioned and supplied with water, plenty of salt for curing our specimens, extra ropes, anchors, etc., we hoisted sails and with the red, white and green pennant of our Southern neighbor flying at the mast-head, a fair northwest wind carried us out the ten miles of tortuous channel across the bar, and at 10:30 we were in blue water and scudding away for Guadalupe. With night came a nasty wind and rain and the sea got very rough.

It was here that I realized that we had come to sea with a chart and an old compass the efficacy of which I had doubts, to represent that nautical paraphernalia, such as sextant, chronometer, almanacs, etc., which all "old-sea dog" navigators think they must have. I told Mr. Carroll that I guessed Lopez must be endowed with the same instinct that brings the homing pigeon



THE HERD AS WE FOUND IT ON OUR FIRST LANDING: ALL THE SEALS BEING ASLEEP AT THE TIME OF PHOTOGRAPHING.

to its cote, over hundreds of miles of strange country; but I didn't mind, as I was used to the "trust-to-luck" way of doing things in Mexico.

Daylight of the morning of the twenty-sixth found us some six miles off the northeast quarter of the island, and at 8:30 we came to anchor in the fairly sheltered bay, at the old barracks on the lee side of the island. After doubly securing our little craft by stretching a rope cable from her stern to the shore, and fastening it to a great rock, we proceeded to make a shore camp, and our cook, Prisciliana, at once got to work cooking up a feast of bread, beans, etc. Since it had been so rough coming over as to make a fire impracticable, we had not had much to eat for forty-eight hours.

Guadaloupe was formerly used by Mexico as a penal island, and on the occasion of my first visit in 1885, there was a colony of some fifty convicts stationed at this little port; the ruins of their old barracks are in evidence today. The island is of volcanic origin, twenty miles long, by an extreme width of about eight; its highest altitude is 4,700 feet. It presents an extremely bold appearance from the sea, and owing to its high, craggy shores and the exceedingly nasty squalls of wind called "woolies," which

blow down from its towering cliffs, it is very dangerous navigating a sailing vessel about its coast. On the twenty-seventh, Mr. Carroll, my man Friday and I climbed up seven miles of very rough trail to the summit, having several objects in view. We wanted some fresh meat, and we did kill several fat goats, some thousands of which range on the island. We also wished to examine into the water supply, in case of emergency, and the only water is on the summit. We found several water holes, but my!—phew! Like the air of the heavens about us, the water smelt of goat, tasted of goat and pretty nearly was goat. And then we wanted if possible, to secure specimens of the *Cara-cara*, a handsome eagle peculiar to the island, as, in fact, are nearly all the land birds. We saw no eagles and they are probably extinct, perhaps exterminated by poison put out by parties interested in the goats; for when these birds were abundant they killed many of the kids.

On the island's northern and western slopes are considerable groves of cabbage-palm and cypress and, for an island so nearly all rock, there is a considerable growth of grass. We collected some specimens of the small land birds, and picking up our goats on the way down,



THREE BULLS LAZILY FLIPPING SAND OVER THEIR BACKS.

reached the vessel about dusk, footsore and weary.

For several days we pulled about the shores, in our small boat, in an endeavor to locate the elephant seal, but were not successful; and so finally sailed the *Freia* around on the weather side of the island. On the morning of the thirty-first, we pulled away from the vessel, in the small boat, to examine a stretch of shore that seemed to be the most promising place not

pulled quietly away and returned to the *Freia*. The wind had died out during the morning and the *Freia* had drifted with a strong current, some fifteen miles in a southerly direction, and it took nearly forty hours to tack back to the seal-beach, where we came to anchor on the morning of June second.

Dropping anchor about a quarter-mile from the beach, in six fathoms of water, and making all snug aboard, Mr. Carroll and I, with two rowers, went ashore.



PROFILE VIEW OF A BIG BULL, SHOWING THE PROBOSCIS, WHICH INDICATES WHY IT IS CALLED ELEPHANT SEAL.

yet explored. Sure enough, on pulling up to a small beach, lying snug against a giant cliff nearly 4,000 feet high, the excited cries of "*Elefante! mucha elefante! mucha grande!*" from my Mexican rowers, caused me to realize that the long-coveted quarry was at hand. We saw several of the big seals asleep on the sand, and two big bulls were swimming in the surf, bellowing and fighting. Not wishing to frighten them until our vessel was safely anchored in a position for business, we

The photograph showing the herd was taken immediately after going ashore, while the animals were still undisturbed. It was certainly a wonderful sight, this herd of gigantic animals all soundly sleeping, and seeming automatically the while to throw sand over their bodies with their front flippers. I suppose this was to protect themselves somewhat from the sun and to keep off the sand flies. When I made a noise, they raised their heads, gazing in wild astonishment, some in slight fear at what was probably



THE KING OF THE HERD, AT TEN FEET FROM THE CAMERA.

their first glimpse of man—gazing with the largest, roundest, darkest, most beautifully liquid eyes into which it had ever been my fortune to look; and right here my heart smote me when I thought of killing these wonderful animals, with such eyes of liquid velvet.

Upon a flourish of the arms and our closer approach, several of the cows, in fright, started for the water. The big bulls elevated their heads to full height, raising on their front flippers and throwing themselves into a position of attack or defense, opening their mouths wide and emitting a gurgling roar; also showing a set of teeth which would do the largest grizzly credit. Considering that the largest of these bulls was nearly seventeen feet in length, over eleven feet

in girth, and weighed probably 3,500 pounds, they made an impressive picture. I have heard the roar or bark of many seals, such as stellars, California sea lion, fur seal, etc., but the roar of the sea elephant is more like the roar of the African lion than anything I have ever heard.

After viewing the herd to our satisfaction, we took a number of photographs which are probably the only photographs from life of the elephant seal, and which will give the reader a good idea of these rare mammals. Two large bulls were then shot, a .32 calibre special being used, and the bullet placed close under the eye; one shot was sufficient to kill. We skinned the two specimens, later killing another big bull just before dark; this was the largest obtained.



THE COW, OR FEMALE, WHICH MUCH RESEMBLES SEVERAL OF OUR OTHER SEALS AND LACKS THE PRONOUNCED PROBOSCIS.



THREE BULLS SWIMMING IN THE SURF AND CURIOUSLY WATCHING US WHILE WE TAKE THEIR PICTURES.

We got one skin aboard that night.

There is a larger species of elephant seal in the Antarctic, frequenting Kerguelen Island and vicinity. The California species was formerly very abundant along this coast of *Baja California*, but persistent hunting for the purpose of obtaining their oil, of which a large animal will yield fifty dollars worth, has exterminated them so completely that Dr. Hornaday evidently did not think it worth while to include them among the seals, in his natural history published several years ago. Since about 1885 they have generally been considered as being extinct.

The surf on the weather side of the island is very bad, hence before going ashore the next morning, we sunk an anchor attached to about 500 feet of rope cable, fastening the other end to a big rock on shore, creating thereby a surf line; and by running it through loops on our boat, bow and stern, we were enabled to pull the boat in or out,

hand over hand, oars being useless in the surf. Even with our surf line, as we found later, we could not always effect a landing, and nearly always got a good wetting. Our three big bull skins were loaded on board during these first two days; and I do not believe there was a time during the remainder of our stay

when we could have got one of these big skins off to the vessel whole, as the sea came on rough, and the way the surf rolled in was frightful. We worked steadily until June 8, getting five skins and one skeleton on board; and losing four skins which we had ready to get aboard the vessel; the rough sea had delayed our landing at times and the heat of the sun spoiled them.

On the eighth, the sea became so rough and the wind so strong, that we were obliged to seek the shelter of our friendly lee-port, in the making of which we were



THE AUTHOR, HARD AT WORK IN CAMP.

caught in a "woolie" and had our sails badly damaged. Our poor captain was much worried during these strenuous days of wind and wave, and his shakings of the head and exclamations such as: "*Caramba! mucha viento, Senor, muy malo!*" were numerous and gloomy.

On the tenth, the weather and sea looking favorable, we sailed back to the seal beach and were fortunate in just getting to an anchorage as night fell. About a half-mile north of the beach

the seals, I judged these fish to be their entire food.

It was very interesting to watch the big bulls come out of the water onto the beach. They would head straight up to the shore, wait for a particularly large wave, then elevating their hind flippers and holding them together so as to make a fan-shaped obstruction to the water, they allowed the wave to carry them onto the beach a short distance, and this was repeated several times to permit them to



THE KING, AFTER ONE SHOT FROM MY .32 SPECIAL, USING A
SOFT-NOSE BULLET.

were some large caves in the rock walls rising from the sea. These caves were somewhat protected from the wrath of wind and wave, and to them, in the roughest weather and at night, the seals would retreat. Here, too, it was possible sometimes to land when the surf was too bad at the beach. The waters in these caves seemed to abound with tiny sardines, not more than two inches long. On examining the stomachs of some of

get hold with their front flippers. Aided by the hitching motion of the cartilaginous ribs, they would crawl to the dry sands, shaking like a great mold of gelatine, the hitching motion being not unlike that of huge inch worms. The proboscis of a large bull is about eighteen inches from eye to tip. The animal has the power of inflating this elongated nose; when so inflated, it much resembles the nose of a moose. The cows are much slimmer

than the males and they lack the pendant nose; their pelage is of a beautiful, silvery, grayish-black color and very soft. The largest cow killed was about twelve feet in length.

We remained here until the thirteenth; then, having a total of ten specimens, and pleased with the result of our trip to date and anxious to be safely in the United States with our cargo, we set sail for San Quentin, scudding down the westerly shore and rounding the south end of the island in half a gale. That evening we ran into a very choppy sea, one big wave hitting our port bow, spinning our little craft around like a top and half filling the cabin with water. The morning of the twentieth found us becalmed off the mainland, twenty miles south of the San Quentin bar. During this morning we were entertained by several big whales which disported themselves in the waters about us, one big old "sulphur-bottom" coming dangerously close.

It took us until the afternoon of the twenty-first to make the bar, and here we had to drop anchor to allow the *St. Denis* to pass out on her way north. I had been hoping to get to San Quentin in time to catch the *St. Denis* this trip and was much chagrined to see her steaming off without us, as I knew it meant a wait of twenty days before I could get north. In trying to tack up the channel that night by moonlight, we ran the *Freia* aground in six feet of water, and with the ebbing tide she gradually keeled over on her side. I spent a wakeful night with an eye to preventing accidents. By morning she had righted and high tide allowed us to proceed on our way and at nine A. M. we landed at San Quentin.

Some days were spent in getting my specimens properly packed for shipment, and during this time I found that it

would be a month before I could get away from San Quentin unless I sailed in my own vessel or drove overland, so I chartered the *Freia* again to sail south to the port of San Carlos, to catch the steamer there. But by this time, my erstwhile crew had become so saturated with *Mescal*, that endeavors to get them on board were fruitless and I was obliged to cast about for other means of getting away.

Mr. Cannon offered a suggestion: "You have just time, by driving hard, to make Ensenada, 150 miles or more north. I have plenty of mules, but the only wagon in town, which is mine, has a burr of the rear axle broken and is useless." I was getting anxious to be on my way, so I asked to see the burr. It was broken in three pieces; these I tied together with a string and smearing the parts with a well-known brand of liquid glue, put it in the sun to dry; it hardened, seemed firm enough, so I made up my mind to try and get through with it. Our specimens were loaded on the heavy freight wagon, making, with our luggage and four men, a load of 3,000 pounds. Four good mules were attached and we pulled out of San Quentin with just seventy-two hours to catch the steamer. I will not describe the difficulties of this trip over rough mountain roads and heated deserts scorching in the hot rays of a July sun. Suffice it that we caught our steamer and landed in San Diego just in time to help celebrate the "Glorious Fourth."

The seals were shipped direct to Europe and today, thanks to the skillful art of the taxidermist, are reposing, or being prepared to repose, in life-like manner, in the Great British Museum and the museums of Tring, Edinburgh and Berlin, that future generations may gaze on one of the by-gone wonders of the animal kingdom.